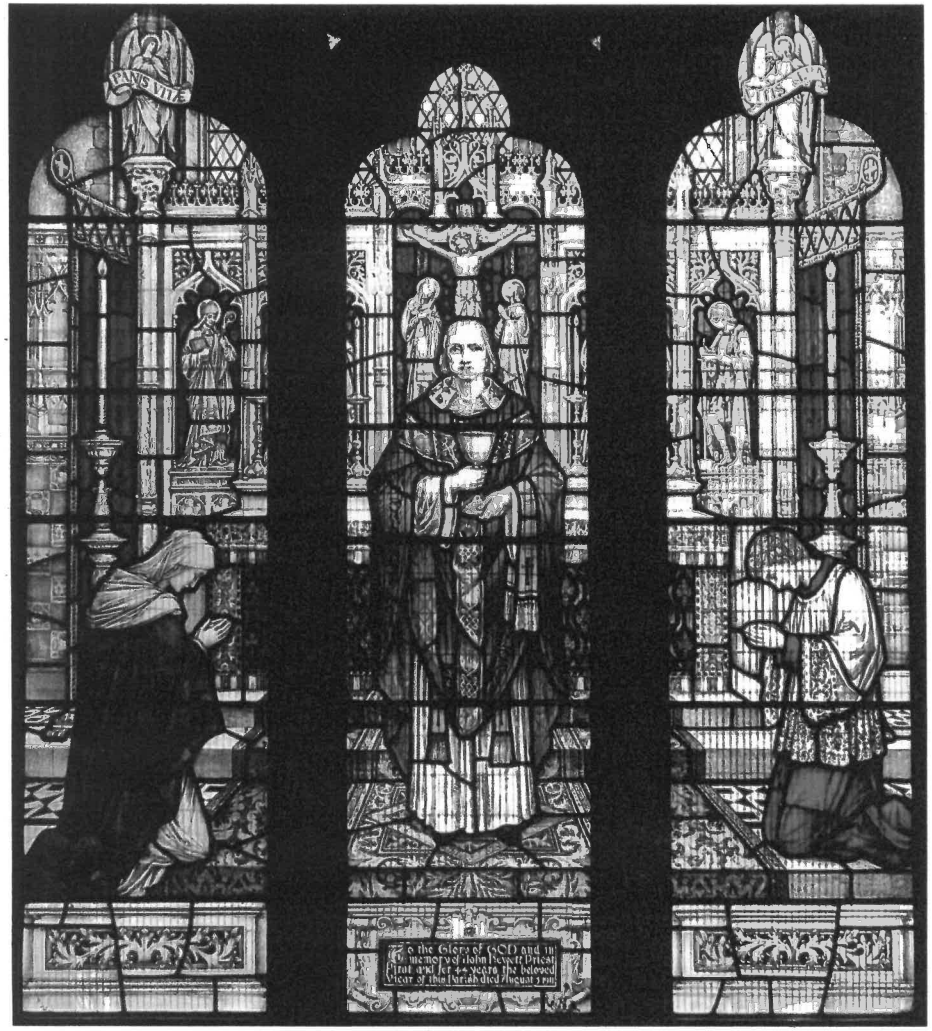
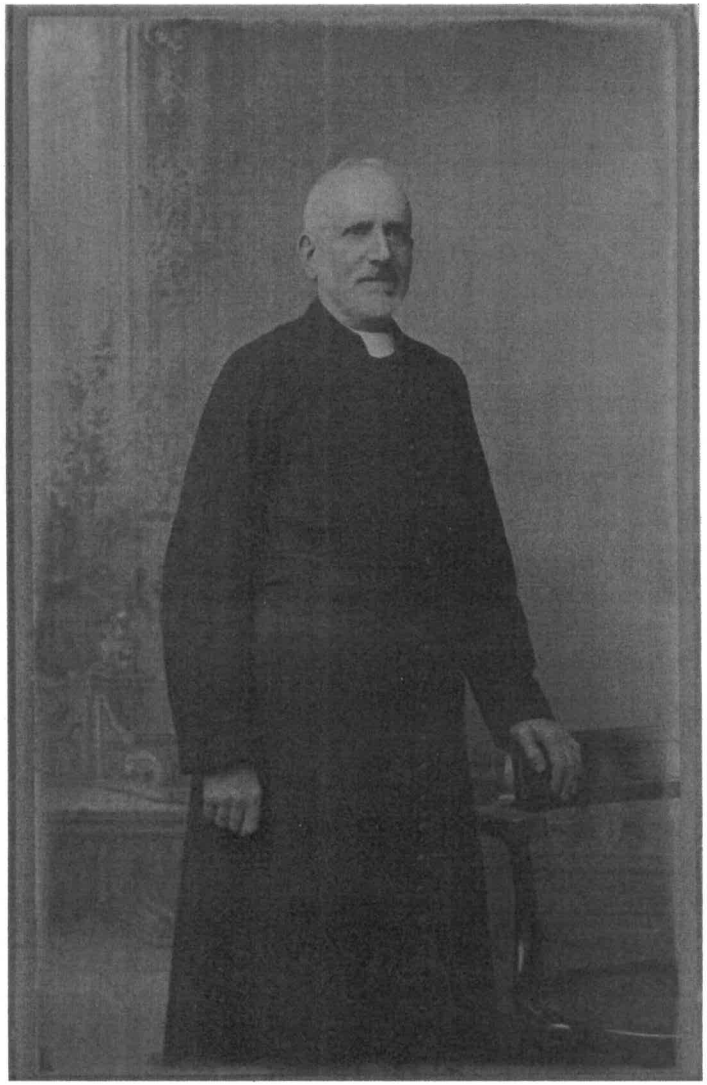


Memorial window to Fr John Hewett in All Saints Church, Babbacombe reproduced by courtesy of Pyramid Photograph, Torquay

THE REVEREND JOHN HEWETT, M.A.
(1830 - 1911)



The first Vicar of Babbacombe
(1867 — 1910)

LECTOR, si monumentum requiris circumspice ("Reader, if you seek his monument look around you"). Sir Christopher Wren's son provided a fitting epitaph when the great architect was laid to rest in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral. The same sentiment was recalled 188 years later to acknowledge the life of the Reverend John Hewett. Not that Babbacombe's first Vicar would have entertained such a vanity for a moment.

Thomas Butterfield, that giant of Victorian church architecture, was responsible for the steepled landmark that has dominated Cary Park for close on 150 years, but it was Father Hewett who established All Saints Church on a firm foundation during his 44 years as Vicar. And although Wren's epitaph was invoked at the time of his death, Father Hewett had already settled on something more modest for his own resting place. The words he chose have echoed the hopes of countless Christians: ***In te domine speravi*** ("In You, O Lord, have I hoped").

The congregation who mourned his passing in 1911 were in no doubt about their debt to his ministry. An inscription on the rear pillar in the north-west corner of the nave declares: 'In blessed memory of John Hewett, to whom, under God, is due the building of this church'. And the memorial cross of Portland stone, erected outside the south door, honours a faithful priest and 'all the good that he has done for his people'.
He had served Babbacombe until his 80th year and if his memory has been somewhat air-brushed from the pages of local history it is fitting that we should cherish his achievements in this, the centenary year of his death.
He was a remarkable figure in so many ways:
* For 20 years, he was the spiritual confidant to the matriarch of one of Britain's noblest families.
* For one awesome month in 1886, the future Queen Alexandra and her daughters were regular worshippers here.
* His eldest son governed a vast province of India (the Taj Mahal

was part of his remit) and was knighted for his services to the British Raj.
* His second son was a rear-admiral who also found fame in India.

John Hewett was born at Ewhurst in Sussex on August 6, 1830. He showed early promise as a scholar and on May 12, 1849 - aged 18 - he was admitted to Clare College, Cambridge, graduating with a BA degree in 1853. He had met a young Irish girl, Anna Louisa Lyster Hammon, daughter of a captain in the Honourable East Indian Company Navy, and they were married in October that year. Their first child, John Prescott Hewett, was born at Barham, near Canterbury, in 1854. By now, Father Hewett had committed himself to a life in holy orders and he was ordained deacon at Chichester Cathedral in 1855.

For his first appointment, he served as curate at the 1066 village of Battle in Sussex, and a second son, George Hayley Hewett, was born there in November.

Father Hewett had continued his studies at Clare College and in 1856 he graduated as an MA. It was also the year that marked his ordination to the priesthood at Peterborough Cathedral. In 1857, he moved to Compton Martin in Somerset, where his eight years as Rector were marked by the births of two daughters and another son.

Torquay, meanwhile, was entering a long period of urban development and a sharp rise in population. In 1860, Prebendary Reginald Barnes had become Vicar of St Marychurch and he superintended the opening and consecration of the rebuilt parish church in July, 1861. When Father Hewett and his family moved to Devon in 1865 his appointment as curate augured well for a flourishing parish.

When he arrived, the population of 'Babbicombe' was no more than 600. It was regarded as a cliff top hamlet situated some distance from the mother church. At the end of his first nine months,

the young curate realised there was a great need for a new church. By now, the population had grown to 850 (and likely to double before building work was completed).
When a public meeting was held in the Schoolroom in November, 1865, local feeling was strong - Babbacombe needed its own parish church. Father Hewett was quite 'startled' at the rapid increase in population and expressed his concern that the Church of England should erect a new building before any new chapels filled the void.

The foundation stone was laid on December 20, 1865, and building work got under way. Two further sons were born in those early years and Father Hewett was appointed Vicar in 1867, prior to the consecration of the building on All Saints Day (November 1) by the great Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford.

The innovative William Butterfield (1814-1900) was one of the most distinguished architects of the Victorian era and his design incorporated 50 varieties of Devon marbles. The pulpit and font, with their intricate polychromatic marbles, remain outstanding examples of his art to this day. When Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, visited the church a few weeks before its consecration he described Butterfield's work as 'pure beauty of line'.

Work on the chancel began in September, 1872, and the completed church, with its tower and spire, was opened on November 1, 1874. The inhabitants of the new parish were generally poor. In fact, a quarter of Torquay's population were in domestic service. Babbacombe had no schools to speak of and religious observance was held in light esteem. Father Hewett's untiring zeal put All Saints Church at the hub of the community. He was an exemplary social worker, sympathetic and earnest, an ardent supporter of the temperance cause and famed for the 'rare eloquence' of his sermons.

He was to serve as Rural Dean of Ipplepen from 1879 to 1892. By

now, the most distinguished member of his regular congregation was the Duchess of Sutherland (former Mistress of the Robes to Queen Victoria). Her husband was one of the richest landowners in the country and a close friend of the Prince of Wales. But the most exalted figure who ever visited the church was the much-loved Princess of Wales (the future Queen-Empress consort of Edward VII). Alexandra and her three daughters stayed with the Duchess in her villa in the Warberries for a five-week visit that elated Torquay throughout March, 1886. The noble ladies shared a devout faith and their presence at All Saints Church every Sunday ensured overflowing congregations.

Father Hewett suffered a personal loss in 1884 with the death of his wife at the age of 55. Two years later, he married Miss Anne Robson, of Sunderland and he was able to take pride in his growing family, particularly the two eldest sons. John Prescott Hewett had entered the Indian Civil Service in 1877 and became Lieutenant-Governor of the Provinces of Agra and Oudh. He organised George V's Coronation Durbar in Delhi in 1911 and was honoured with several knighthoods. George Hayley Hewett, the second son, served in the Zulu War, achieved the rank of rear-admiral and became director of the Indian Royal Marine. Both brothers were included in Who's Who.

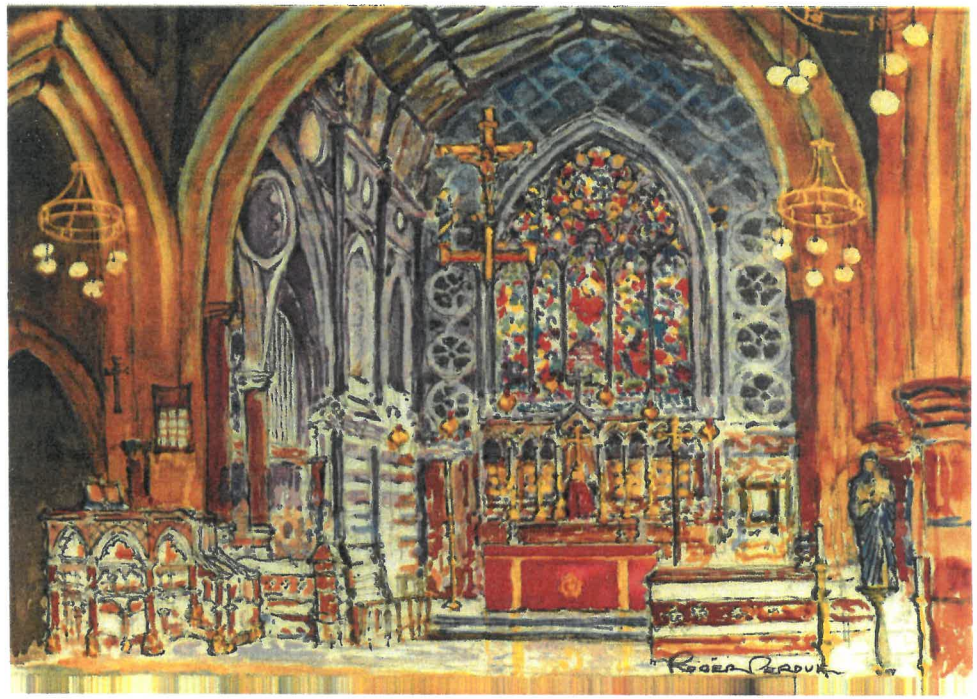
As the years began to take their toll, Father Hewett resigned as Vicar in his 80th year in August, 1910. He retired to Teignmouth and died in his seafront home on August 5, 1911. He was buried at Teignmouth Cemetery: his wife's grave was laid alongside 12 years later. A stained glass window was dedicated to his memory in the north aisle of the church in January, 1913, followed by the erection of the memorial cross in May.

But it is the sentiment of a contemporary obituary that has resonated most clearly over the intervening centenary since his passing: 'His outward memorial stands today in the glorious church of All Saints, the building of which, stone by stone and stage by

stage, he was allowed to watch and superintend. The souls of men, women and children, built by him, under God, strong in faith, into a spiritual temple, will stand in the last great day as an imperishable testimony to his work and worth.'

Written by Ian Woodford, a regular worshipper at All Saints, Babbacombe.

Fr Hewett's grave alongside that of his second wife, Anne in Teignmouth Old Cemetery



Interior view of All Saints Parish Church, Babbacombe by Roger Perdue